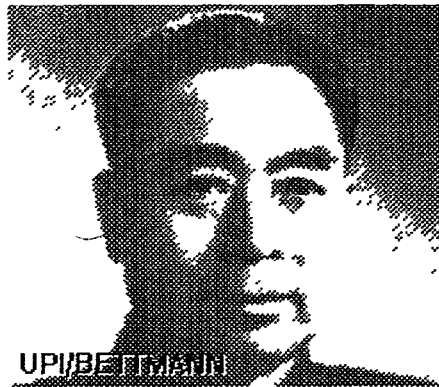


NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

*ZHOU ENLAI
AND
NORMALIZATION OF
SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS*



Chou En-Lai, in short, was one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met. Urbane, infinitely patient, extraordinarily intelligent, subtle, he moved through our discussions with an easy grace that penetrated to the essence of our new relationship as if there were no sensible alternative

Henry Kissinger
The White House Years

LTCOL D C O'BRIEN USMC/ CLASS OF 1995
COURSE I
SEMINAR J
FACULTY SEMINAR LEADER CAPT COLE
FACULTY ADVISOR COL GLASGOW

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INTRODUCTION

Nobody ever accused Henry Kissinger of indulging in gratuitous flattery of the various actors with whom he shared the world stage. Yet, his enthusiastic regard and soaring praise for Zhou Enlai's abilities and accomplishments as a statesman border on deification. The possibility certainly exists that Kissinger views Zhou's achievements through rose tinted lenses. Inflating Zhou's image as one of the truly great statesman of our time, after all, serves equally well to polish Kissinger's professional halo as a practitioner of statecraft of heroic proportions. An examination of the events leading to the 1972 Shanghai Communique and subsequent normalization of Sino-American relations, however, still strongly supports Zhou Enlai's reputation as one of the premier statesmen of this century. Zhou's elegant but hard-nosed style of statecraft achieved China's national security objectives and admirably served China's national security strategy. Evaluating the formulation and implementation of China's national security strategy during the period of Sino-American normalization provides ample support for Kissinger's towering opinion of Zhou's statecraft.¹ Voltaire's admonition, however, about first defining one's terms is sound advice and merits consideration.

The most slippery aspects of national security strategy studies seem to lurk in the murky depths of terminology. Nevertheless, it seems decidedly unscholarly to begin a discussion of such lofty concepts without first making at least an attempt to narrow the apparently endless field of possible definitions. The definition of national strategy presented in *Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 1* (1987) appears to be as good (or as nebulous) as any of the other numerous offerings.

¹Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh, ed. *Chinese Foreign Policy-Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 361-62. Although he never achieved Mao's status as a theorist, he was one of the finest statesmen and diplomats of this century. He not only formulated Chinese foreign policy, but he was also the chief architect of Chinese domestic policy during this period.

the art and science of developing and using the political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives

The element of artistry (alluded to in the JCS definition) required for the successful application of a nation's political, economic and psychological powers is a fair approximation of that elusive quality commonly referred to as *statecraft*. Analysis of China's national security strategy (as well as Zhou Enlai's statecraft in implementing China's strategy) should start with a review of fundamental assumptions.² Zhou's assumptions--to include his observations of the domestic as well as the international environment--formed the foundation on which he conducted China's foreign policy during the period of Sino-American *rapprochement*.

ASSUMPTIONS

Although there is no question that Zhou was an ideologue of the first order, he was also enough of a realist to adjust his assumptions as he perceived changes developing in his environment. He believed, for example, that the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States (at the height of the Vietnam war) was shifting in favor of the Soviets. This perceived power shift caused Zhou to reevaluate Chinese assumptions and implement necessary changes to national policy. This perception of a shifting power balance was, in fact, one of the underlying factors which subsequently brought the Chinese to the negotiating table. He harbored no illusions about the realities affecting his foreign policy and he did not allow ideology to get in the way of his statecraft. During his negotiations with Kissinger, for example, Zhou was fond of quoting an old Chinese proverb: *The helmsman must guide the boat by using the waves, otherwise it will be submerged by the waves*.³ He believed in dealing with his environment (at

²This analysis of Zhou Enlai's statecraft is constructed around the framework contained in Professor Terry L. Deibel's five leveled design for national security strategy.

³Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Henry Kissinger: Little Brown & Co. 1979) 781.

least in the foreign policy arena) as he found it, and not necessarily as described by Marxist dialectic. If necessary, Zhou could readily quote the applicable Chinese Socialist dogma that justified pending changes or compromises in foreign policy.

The international system presented policy constraints as well as opportunities. By the end of the 1960s, it had become apparent that China's proxy wars had been largely unsuccessful.⁴ China also lacked the legitimacy that would have been conferred by membership in the United Nations. Although the status associated with UN membership would have marginally enhanced China's negotiating position in 1970, Zhou's timing to begin normalization of relations with the United States could not have been better. Even though Kissinger had begun secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese to extricate the United States from the Vietnam war, the end of American involvement in Southeast Asia was still five years away. The domestic social upheaval and violence which reduced America's foreign policy options at the same time allowed the Chinese more flexibility in their foreign policy design. In addition to balancing what the Chinese perceived to be a growing Soviet threat, the international system presented opportunities for membership in the United Nations as well as unification with Taiwan. China's domestic conditions underscored additional constraints and opportunities which required careful consideration before they were assimilated into Zhou's strategy equation.

China was still struggling in 1970 to recover from the bloody excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The Revolution's legacy of ideological zealotry was a formidable obstacle to Zhou's goal of compromise with the United States. Zhou was further constrained by China's inability to project significant strategic military power beyond its borders.⁵ The People's Liberation Army

⁴Robinson and Shambaugh 384. At the time of Sino-American normalization, China's client states included North Korea, Vietnam, Pakistan, Albania, Tanzania, and Romania. China's support for revolutionary organizations and national independence movements included the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Communist parties in Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia, and the national liberation movements in Rhodesia, Mozambique, and Angola.

⁵Robinson and Shambaugh 201. China did, however, deploy 320,000 People's Liberation Army troops to Vietnam from October 1965 until March 1968. Although the Chinese went to some lengths to avoid direct confrontation with U.S. troops, the PLA troops were employed in logistic and anti-aircraft units and engaged U.S. aircraft in combat.

(PLA) consisted of vast infantry formations. During the relatively brief period of time since its inception, the People's Republic of China (PRC) had repeatedly demonstrated the capability and national will for military intervention in border states. India, Tibet, and Vietnam, for example, have certainly acquired varying degrees of respect for the PLA. The PLA was poorly equipped, however, and suffered limiting shortages of supporting arms, logistic sustainment, and strategic mobility. Despite its numbers (even after the military reductions of the 1960s) and demonstrated potential for regional intervention, however, the PLA (including the Air Force and Navy) was a third world force not serviceable as a global instrument of foreign policy. Finally, China's decimated agrarian economy and huge population problems foreshadowed the weak position from which Zhou was forced to approach the negotiating table.⁶

Zhou and Mao were convinced that the motivation and intentions of the major actors in the international system were arrayed against China. (It is useful to keep in mind that paranoia is neither necessarily a bad thing nor does it automatically imply that *they* are *not* out to get you.) Krushchev's missile deployment to Cuba confirmed Chinese suspicions that, in flagrant violation of Marxist-Leninist principles, the Soviets aspired to hegemony.⁷ The Soviets had responded to Chinese provocations along the Ussuri River with massed troop formations on the border. Increasingly more cordial relations between the Soviets and India in the late 1960s increased Chinese anxiety over Soviet intentions. Although the United States was still engaged in Vietnam, the Chinese were nonetheless concerned about indications of American aspirations to Asian hegemony. The possibility of a tentative thawing of Soviet-American relations, a strong American presence in South Korea, and a robust American security treaty with the Japanese, all brought American intentions with respect to China under suspicion. The potential for rising Japanese

⁶ Samuel S. Kim, ed. *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Relations in the Post Cold War Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 66. Mao's *Great Leap Forward* (1958-1961) is only one example of the disastrous economic and agricultural programs which devastated China. Designed to foster agricultural self reliance, the *Great Leap* ended in appalling famine and over twenty million Chinese dead.

⁷ Alfred D. Wilhelm, Jr. *The Chinese at the Negotiating Table: Style and Characteristics* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1994), 12.

nationalism and resurgent Japanese militarism only compounded China's apprehension about the intentions of major international actors

Zhou concluded that the United States, despite the possibility of *detente* with the Soviets, would be receptive to a diplomatic arrangement with China to counterbalance Soviet influence in Asia. This assumption with respect to American motivation became the seminal area of common interest on which Kissinger and Zhou began normalization of Sino-American relations. Chinese national interests (and threats to their national interest) easily fit into the context of the international and domestic constraints and opportunities which were derived from environmental assumptions.

NATIONAL INTEREST

Donald E. Neuchterlein's definition of *national interest* is the most useful of the many available

*the national interest is the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state
in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment*⁸

Zhou Enlai defined China's national interests very much like the interests of the United States today: security, prosperity, and promotion of beliefs (ideology) abroad. The Clinton administration's articulation of what is properly American national interest serves equally well to convey China's prioritization of national interest.

*Protecting our nation's security-- our people, our territory, and our way of life--
is my Administration's foremost mission and constitutional duty.*⁹

Security of the nation, economic welfare and prosperity, and promulgation of Marxism throughout the world were essentially Zhou's views of China's national interests.

⁸Thomas G. Patterson, ed., *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy, Vol. II Since 1914* (Lexington, D.C.: Heath and Co., 1989) 156.

⁹The White House, *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994) 1-5.

The idea that a nation's needs and desires are affected by other sovereign states in the external environment (which was defined through observation and formulation of assumptions) was central to the Chinese perception of their national interests (and threats to national interest) at the time of the Kissinger negotiations. Specifically, the perceived power shift between the Soviets and the United States caused the Chinese to reevaluate the hegemonic aspirations of major actors with respect to China's national interests. Zhou established clear, attainable foreign policy objectives which, if realized, would effectively serve China's dynamic national interests.

OBJECTIVES

Zhou Enlai's primary foreign policy objective in 1970 was to establish a counter to the hegemonic threats of all major actors. Kissinger believes that the Chinese were concerned only with Soviet hegemony. Subsequent interviews suggest, however, that Zhou viewed hegemony as a form of *twentieth century imperialism*.¹⁰ In this context, it seems unlikely that he would not also have been concerned with the position of Japan and the United States in the Asian power equation. Zhou's unwavering first priority throughout the negotiations with Kissinger and Nixon during the early 1970s was a balance of power acceptable to China.

Zhou's position on Taiwan never changed. Unification of the two Chinas was not a negotiable issue, but the Chinese were willing to assign unification a lower priority than the balance of power objective. Mao once commented to Nixon, for example, that China could wait one hundred years for the eventual unification with Taiwan in order to keep the diplomatic focus on the primary objective of Asian power equilibrium. Other Chinese foreign policy objectives included assistance in jump-starting a devastated economy and membership in the United Nations. The Chinese foreign policy objectives were significant for two reasons. First, they were clearly defined. There was no ambiguity for either the Chinese or the Americans with whom negotiations were later

¹⁰Ronald C. Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) 184.

conducted Secondly, Zhou never lost sight of the primary objective--national security and no foreign hegemony

RESOURCES

All of China's foreign policy objectives were feasible only if they could be achieved cheaply and without the requirement for mobilized power China's third world military lacked, among other things, strategic mobility and was consequently incapable of either power projection (or, equally important, posing a threat of power projection) beyond border states China's agrarian economy was still struggling to overcome the effects of disastrous economic and agricultural programs Although China was rich in natural resources, they were undeveloped and of little use as economic leverage Geography presented no real power base China's vast frontiers were difficult to defend and the Chinese did not control any strategic waterways China was a net debtor with respect to foreign aid and unable to resort to that traditional source of diplomatic leverage Zhou was well aware, therefore, that he entered negotiations with the United States from a position of relative weakness His success in achieving his country's strategic goals would be entirely dependent on his ability to optimize the only real resource available to him--his artistry as a statesman and a diplomat

PLANS

Zhou's blueprint for matching limited resources with significant strategic objectives was to establish a relationship with the United States That relationship, or normalization of relations, had to be solidly anchored on common interest The challenge of finding that commonality was the most difficult obstacle to successful negotiations with Kissinger in 1971 Kissinger describes in detail his experiences during those talks in both *The White House Years* and *Diplomacy* He makes no secret of his admiration for Zhou for successfully determining a shared interest Equally important, however, was Zhou's stubborn insistence on underscoring the differences between the two countries Although Kissinger initially opposed the embellishment of national differences, he gradually agreed that presenting contrasting positions would also

accentuate shared interests. Zhou's reason for clearly articulating differences was, of course, to assure his political rivals within the Chinese bureaucracy and China's third world allies that Zhou had not forsaken the world socialist struggle. Zhou's plan boiled down to establishing a *rapprochement* with the United States and thereby quickly achieving his primary objective (no foreign hegemony) and eventually realizing his other objectives of unification, stimulated economy, and United Nations membership.

CONCLUSION

Sino-American normalization was only one of Zhou Enlai's many historic accomplishments. His successful negotiations with Kissinger and Nixon were particularly significant, however, because Zhou was constrained by a relatively weak negotiating position. His success or failure depended entirely on his ability as a statesman. He had neither potential power (economic capacity, natural resources, etc.) nor actual or mobilized power which normally serve as instruments of foreign policy. China's lack of a military capability to exert influence on a global or strategic level, for example, handicapped Zhou in pursuing strategic goals. This limitation should not be dismissed or underestimated. George F. Kennan confirmed the primacy of military force as an instrument of foreign policy during an address to the National War College in 1946:

*You have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet armed force in the background. [it] is probably the most important single instrumentality in the conduct of foreign policy.*¹¹

Zhou effectively compensated for his weak negotiating position with clearly defined objectives, unwavering prioritization of those objectives, and his unique style of elegant but hard-nosed statecraft. The measure of his success is the fact that, with the possible exception of the unification of Taiwan, he realized all of his foreign policy objectives during his lifetime. He

¹¹John Lewis Gaddis *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 39.

maintained Asian power equilibrium by normalizing relations with the United States. China's subsequent most favored nation status with the United States helped to revitalize China's stagnant economy. Zhou also normalized relations with Canada (1970), West Germany (1972), and Japan (1972). Prior to his retirement for medical reasons in 1974, he presided over China's 1972 entry into the United Nations.¹²

His accomplishments notwithstanding, Zhou remains an unlikely candidate for canonization. As Kissinger accurately observed:

*The Chinese were cold-blooded practitioners of power politics, a far cry from the romantic humanitarians imagined in Western intellectual circles*¹³

During his career as the PRC's first and longest serving Premier, Zhou fully supported Mao's bloody excesses. His vision, clarity of thought, and disciplined ability to focus on strategic priorities, however, are the characteristics which enabled Zhou to attain historic achievements in the foreign policy arena. His diplomatic contributions exceeded those of any other Chinese statesman in this century. The brilliant statecraft with which he achieved that success merits consideration by contemporary diplomats and serious students of international relations.

¹²Robinson and Shambaugh 362

¹³Kissinger 747

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